

Existential Crisis

Am I happy or unambitious? Am I satisfied or complacent? They say a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush, but they also say that life is sweetened by risk. They say a wise man knows his limitations, but also say that if you can dream it, you can achieve it. Is it a sign of courage or cowardice to acknowledge your limitations? You must go out of your comfort zone. You must grow. You must take on new challenges. If you're sitting still, you aren't moving forward.

I am happy, content, satisfied with the work I do and the life I have carved out for myself. Although my work is not particularly remarkable or important, and although it is, like any kind of work, occasionally a burden, it is, on the balance, personally rewarding and fulfilling and it provides, I hope, an important service to the community. I enjoy the respect of my peers, the love and respect of my family, do not suffer excessively from financial worries or woes, and enjoy significant, or at least adequate, leisure time and material prosperity.

But then something begins nagging at me. Is my happiness, my contentment, my satisfaction really only a lack of ambition? Am I complacent, leaving deeper inner resources, abilities and interests unexplored and untapped? What more am I capable of?

What more could I achieve if only I expanded my reach? Pushed the envelope? Got out of my comfort zone? Discovered talents I never knew I had and never sat still?

Should I reach for the stars? Should I dare to be great and push my talents to their limit? Should I light a fire in my belly?

What might happen if I stretched my wings and dreamed the impossible dream? If I blazed my own trail and forged ahead?

Should I take the initiative? Seize the moment? Refuse to play it safe? Make it happen?

Just do it, they tell me. Stay hungry. Never settle for good enough. The sky is the limit. Am I up for the challenge? Should I take the bull by the horns and make hay while the sun shines?

To what end do we strive? Is it happiness? Service to others? Fame, respect, honor? Virtue? To leave the world a better place? To leave a lasting legacy? Or is it, as Emerson says, to bestow honest toil on that plot of ground which is given us to till? To take ourselves for better, or for worse, as is our portion? To accept that place which divine providence has found for us?

Our endless strivings betray our deepest fear—that we've been cheated, that we have cheated ourselves.

So we work. We strive. We toil. We persevere and persist. We apply ourselves. We hustle. We get down to it and keep at it. We plug away and knuckle down. We put our noses to the grindstone, our shoulders to the wheel, and keep our eyes on the prize. We get serious. We

swing into action and hammer away. Perhaps we advance and arrive at our intended final destination, only to find it is a mirage, or perhaps a checkpoint, another in an endless series of way stations on a road leading to nowhere.

No, there is no wisdom in our never-ending labors. There is no meaning beyond chaos and the dark. If we strive to realize our dreams, to fulfill our promise, to reclaim the kingdom that is our due and from which we have been exiled for as long as we can remember, we will find only misery, frustration, torment -- because our dreams are as the thirst of poor Tantalus—never slaked, never satisfied. We dream, we toil, we die. Meanwhile, the world endures.

Matthew Hurt
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